

Profile

SALLY GWYNNE AND MOLLY VAZEILLE: The Wives of the Wesley Brothers by Marilyn Färdig Whiteley



Sally Gwynne



Molly Vazeille

On August 28, 1747, as Charles Wesley was on his way to Ireland, he stopped to visit a clergyman friend in South Wales. Nearby was Garth, the large country estate of Marmaduke Gwynne. The squire had met the Wesley brothers two years earlier, and now he came see Charles, bringing with him two of his daughters, Rebecca and Sarah. Charles accepted an invitation to come to Garth to preach to the household, and there he remained for several days.

Charles took particular pleasure in making the acquaintance of Sarah (known as Sally) despite their difference in ages: he was nearly 40, and she was only 21. She was the fifth of nine children. Charles remained at Garth only six days, but the visit would change his life. As he later told Sally, it was “love a first sight”.

While he was in Ireland, Charles and Sally corresponded. Gradually his letters became less that of a pastor and more that of an intimate friend. When he returned from Ireland the following

March, he stopped once again at Garth. He was tired and ill from his work, and Sally took care of him for six days as he rested and recovered. At the end of this time, on April 3, 1748, Charles proposed and Sally happily accepted.

The engagement, however, could not yet be made public, for there were two obstacles to be overcome. The first and obvious one was that Charles must obtain the consent of Sally's family. She had been raised in a large and comfortable household with 20 servants, many visitors, tutors for the daughters, and a resident chaplain. Charles, on the other hand, had no fixed residence or regular income; he lived with the frugality necessary for a Methodist itinerant. He could not support Sally in the kind of life to which she was accustomed. Though Sally herself was willing to follow him, how would her family feel about the match?

Fortunately Sally had an ally in her sister Becky, who had been with Sally when she first met Charles. Becky offered to approach their mother. To the couple's delight, the woman replied that she "would rather give her child to Mr. Wesley than to any man in England". The Gwynnes would permit their daughter to live in modest circumstances. At the same time, however, they needed the assurance that Sally would have reasonable financial security. Arrangements for that could not be worked out until the marriage received approval from a second source, namely Charles's brother, John. And that was the second obstacle.

Many years earlier, after returning to England from Georgia, the brothers made an agreement that neither would marry, "or take any steps toward it", without consulting the other. Sometime before Charles asked for Sally's hand, he had mentioned to John that he was attracted to her. John had "neither opposed, nor much encouraged" the relationship. Once Charles and Sally had entered into an agreement – even before her parents were consulted – Charles had an obligation to inform John and gain his consent, but he did not act quickly. Perhaps he was reluctant because he knew that John felt it better for Methodist preachers to remain single. Furthermore, though Charles intended to continue with his

evangelistic and pastoral work as before, marriage would involve change. Finally, in November, he spoke with John, and to Charles' great relief he agreed to the marriage.

Charles needed John's co-operation in working out a financial settlement that would satisfy the Gwynnes. Although some Methodists were financially secure, a large number of those attracted to the Wesleyan preaching came from the poorer classes and could give little more than hospitality to the itinerants. A major financial resource for the young movement was its publishing business. John wrote and edited extensively both for Methodist preachers and for ordinary readers, while Charles was an excellent and prolific hymn writer.

After much work, a marriage settlement was finally agreed upon. Money raised from the sale of publications would be invested in an annuity to produce a yearly income of £100 for Sally. This involved a significant commitment of Methodist funds, even though it provided Sally with a much more modest life than she had enjoyed at home.

All seemed in order on April 1, 1749, when the brothers set forth for the Gwynne home and the wedding. But then John dallied. Charles, eager to reach their destination, learned with consternation that John had arranged to preach along the way. Once they reached Garth, however, they met with Sally's mother, and John agreed to the details of the financial settlement.

Rising at four on the morning of Saturday, April 8, Charles, John, Sally, and Becky spent more than three hours in prayer and in song. At eight, all the family met at the church, and John performed the ceremony. Back at the house, they joined in "prayer and thanksgiving". In his journal, Charles wrote: "We were cheerful without mirth, serious without sadness."

During the next days in the Gwynne home, Charles preached frequently. Then on April 21, he left Garth, travelling one day with Sally, her father, and one of her sisters. The following day he wrote in his journal, "I cheerfully left my partner for the Master's work, and rode with Harry to Bristol." Before their marriage, Sally had

promised that she would not interfere with his missionary travels, and he began his marriage by following his accustomed pattern. But soon there was a sign of a change to come.

Bristol was an important centre of Methodist activity. There on May 27, Charles wrote, "I hired a small house, near my worthy friend Vigor's, such an one as suited a stranger and pilgrim upon earth." A few days later he rejoined Sally, and most of the time during the next months the two travelled together as Charles preached. Finally, on September 1, 1749, Sally and Charles took possession of their home in Bristol.

During the next years, Charles continued to travel and preach, and Sally went with him some of the time. Her family moved to Ludlow in England soon after her marriage, and Sally visited them, and when she was in Bristol, her sister Becky was a frequent companion. Sally had grown up in a family accustomed to offering hospitality, and she welcomed Methodist itinerant preachers to her new home.

Her life was not without sorrows. Sometime during 1750, she suffered a miscarriage, and this was only the first of a series of griefs. In 1752, she gave birth to a son, Jacky. In December of the next year, she contracted a virulent form of smallpox. When Charles received the news, he rushed home, where he found her greatly changed: "From the crown of the head to the soles of her feet there is no soundness. Yet, under her sorest burden, she blessed God that she had not been inoculated; receiving the disease as immediately sent from Him." Soon Jacky contracted smallpox, too, and for him it proved fatal; he died near the end of 1753. Sally recovered, but from that time on her looks were altered. Never again did she appear much younger than her husband.

There were more births, and more deaths. A daughter, Martha Maria, was born and died in 1755. In 1757, Sally gave birth to a son whom they named Charles, after his father. His birth was followed two years later by that of a daughter, named for her mother. Sally gave birth to two more daughters, Susanna in 1761 and Selina in 1764, but neither survived infancy. Finally Samuel was born in 1766. Thus of eight children, only three lived to adulthood.

Susanna, mother of Charles, was systematic and strict in the upbringing of her children. She believed it necessary to break their will so they would be receptive to learning. Charles wanted this applied to his own children. Sally was lenient, even though Charles instructed her to be stricter. He also wanted the children protected from mingling with those of the town. Although the oldest child attended a school briefly, for the most part the children were educated by tutors. They learned the classics from Charles, and literature and music from Sally.

Sally played the harpsichord and sang with a sweet voice. Not only did she provide the children with their first musical instruction, but she sang to quiet and to amuse them. Both sons gave early evidence of outstanding musical ability. Charles could play a tune on the harpsichord when he was three, and Samuel began composing when he was very young.

Inevitably marriage to Sally changed the life of her husband, and in 1757 he retired from the itinerancy. Yet he continued to labour actively, leading worship in both Bristol and London, and writing hymns. In 1771, the family moved to London. John hoped that they would live near the centre of Methodist activity so that Charles might take more responsibility for the London society. However a Mrs. Gumley offered them the use of her large house in the suburb of Marylebone, furnished and free, and that is where they lived.

Young Charles had been studying organ in Bristol, and in London both boys had increased musical advantages. Two prominent musicians were so impressed by their talent that they offered to teach them without charge. Apparently Sally had come into an inheritance, and the family paid for some of the sons' musical training, spending considerably more than Sally's annuity or the royalties from Charles's hymns would have allowed.

The sons gave concerts in their spacious home, and their parents developed friendships in social circles far different from that of the Methodist societies. Charles was occasionally criticized for his clothing, entertaining, and social contacts as he increasingly entered into the style of life which Sally had known from birth.

Charles's strength waned during his latter years. After a lengthy illness, he died on March 29, 1788, and Sally was left a widow. She gave up the grand house and moved into much smaller accommodation. Though her children had not become members of the Methodist society prior to their father's death, Sally lived to see two of them do so. At the great age of 96, she caught a cold which weakened her, and she died on December 28, 1822.

For several decades, another story intertwined with that of Sally and Charles. That is the one concerning Molly Vazeille and John Wesley. In 1749, during the first summer of his marriage, Charles noted in his journal: "At Ned Perronet's I met Mrs. Vazeille, a woman of a sorrowful spirit." He could not have foreseen how her life would connect with theirs – and most of all with that of John – for many years to come.

At that time, however, John had another woman on his mind. He had long believed that he should not marry, because it might prevent him from devoting all of his time to God's work, but he now changed his mind. The object of his affections was a widow named Grace Murray, a woman of humble background but great usefulness in the Methodist work. Soon after Sally and Charles settled in Bristol, Charles learned of his brother's intention. He objected to the match, partly on the grounds of the unsuitability of Grace's status. Also, although he was very happy in his new marriage, he probably recognized already the restrictions and responsibilities of a married man, and he did not want John's leadership of the movement hampered. Charles reacted so strongly against the match that he took steps to prevent it. His actions were successful, but they created a strong tension between the two brothers.

The following spring, Sally and Charles had further contact with Mrs. Vazeille. On May 15, 1750, Charles travelled with her to the home of Sally's family in Ludlow. They gave the stranger "all the civility and love that they could show: and she seemed equally pleased with them." Later in the month, Charles, Sally, Mrs. Vazeille, and a few others made their way to London. Once they

reached the city, Sally and Charles spent eight or nine days at Mrs. Vazeille's house on Threadneedle Street.

During the next months, Charles's journal mentioned her no more, so undoubtedly she was far from his thoughts when, on February 2, 1751, he received startling news: John intended to marry! But he satisfied only the letter, and not the spirit, of their old agreement, since he told Charles simply of his decision and not the identity of his choice. Charles had interfered once, but this time he would not have that opportunity! In his own words, Charles "was thunderstruck". Without knowing John's choice of partner he was opposed to the decision. Charles only learned from a friend that John planned to marry Mrs. Vazeille.

Molly (Mary) Vazeille's husband had died in 1747. They were both of Huguenot stock, and it was through contact with Huguenot Methodists in London that Sally and Charles had met her. Her late husband had been a successful merchant and had left Molly and their four children comfortably supported by an annuity and a house on Threadneedle Street.

It was to that house that John made an unanticipated visit. On February 10, just over a week after his conversation with Charles, John hurried between preaching appointments. Crossing the London Bridge he slipped on ice and injured his ankle. He managed to preach, but later in the day, as the pain worsened, he had himself taken to Molly's home where he spent the next days convalescing. On the 18th or 19th of the month, John and Molly were married. Surprisingly, John made no mention of the event in his journal.

A month after their wedding, John wrote, "I cannot understand, how a Methodist Preacher can answer it to God, to preach one sermon, or travel one day less, in a married, than in a single state." He quoted I Corinthians 7:29: "In this respect, surely *it remaineth, that they who have wives, be as though they had none.*" Thus, acting according to his own principles, two weeks after his marriage John left for a meeting in Bristol, and after a brief visit back he departed again, this time for Scotland.

Like Sally, Molly tried travelling with her husband, but it didn't go well. Although she was about seven years younger than her

husband, Molly was older than Sally, and by nature less adaptable. She had not been born into wealth but, instead, had reached her comfortable status through marriage. Perhaps that made her less willing to give up that to which she had become accustomed. Furthermore, even if her sons were away at school, she had her daughter, Jenny, with her. They needed to travel by coach, not by horseback, and that was expensive. In addition, by both principle and necessity, Methodist itinerants generally accepted the most basic accommodations. Molly found all this difficult, and her complaints made life unpleasant for her husband. Molly gave up her house and the couple lived at the Foundery when they were in London. Increasingly she spent her time there, not travelling with John.

Nevertheless, from the beginning Molly had much to do at home to fulfill the responsibilities John expected of any good Methodist. Less than a month after their marriage, he advised her to remember the poor and visit the prison. He continued, "I want you to crowd all your life with the work of faith and the labour of love." She was to sell her jewels and give the money to the poor. John expected of her the plain living and frugality that he himself had practised for decades. As she complied, he commended her for "your plainness of dress, your sitting among the poor at the preaching, your using sage-tea and not being delicate in your food."

In the same letter, in May of 1752, John chastised himself: "The thing which I feared has come upon me. I have not conversed with you so seriously as I thought. I ought always to speak seriously and weightily with you, as I would with my guardian angel. Undoubtedly it is the will of God that we should be as guardian angels to each other. O what an union is that whereby we are united! The resemblance even of that between Christ and His Church. And can I laugh or trifle a moment when with you? O let that moment return no more!" John obviously had high but rather cold expectations of their relationship!

He found Molly useful in the business affairs that had to be carried on when he was away. She kept him informed of publishing matters, and paid bills, and sometimes gave John welcome advice

concerning business arrangements. Many 18th century women played a part in the family business, and the apparent ease with which she moved quickly into this role, and continued to serve in it until the final break-up of the marriage, suggests that she may have had experience in the business of her first husband.

To oversee the Book Room and the Methodist societies in general, John needed to keep abreast of the communications which arrived while he was away, and so when they had been married slightly more than a month John wrote, "If any letter comes to you directed to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, open it: it is for yourself." That instruction proved disastrous.

Although Molly had been a Methodist before she married, she did not exhibit a zealous piety. John left her at home for long periods, unless she was willing to undergo the rigours of travel; he scorned laughter and "trifling" when they were together; and he expected her to devote herself to God's business as he did. Then, when Molly read John's mail – as he had instructed her to do – she discovered that he corresponded with many women, sometimes expressing a degree of empathy with them that she found lacking in his relationship with her. There is no evidence of impropriety on John's part, though he seemed to recognize very weakly a distinction between the pastoral and the personal. Molly became suspicious, and jealous!

Her jealousy led her to seek evidence of unfaithfulness by spying upon John, and secretly searching his papers. Early in 1758, she found a letter addressed to Sarah Ryan, housekeeper at Kingswood, in which John wrote, "The conversing with you, either by speaking or writing, is an unspeakable blessing to me. I cannot think of you without thinking of God. Others often lead me to Him; but it is, as it were, going round about: you bring me straight into His presence." After speaking severely to John, she left him. In two days she returned, but this was the first of many angry departures.

Molly's temperament was mercurial; in one moment she could be gracious and charming, and a few minutes later her fury might know no bounds. She not only sought but probably fabricated

evidence to show John in an unfavourable light, and she attempted publicly to gain sympathy and undermine his reputation.

In his frustration with her behaviour, John was blind both to its causes and to how he might avoid alienating her further. In a letter written June 15, 1774, he not only listed his complaints against her and what she must do to gain his approval; but also stated: “God has used many means to curb your stubborn will and break the impetuosity of your temper. He has given you a dutiful but sickly daughter; He has taken away one of your sons. Another has been a grievous cross; as the third probably will be. He has suffered you to be defrauded of much money; He has chastened you with strong pain. And still He may say, ‘How long liftest thou up thyself against Me?’ Are you more humble, more gentle, more patient, more placable than you was? I fear quite the reverse; I fear your natural tempers are rather increased than diminished.”

Molly left John two months later for the last time. Her daughter had married a Methodist preacher, and he later made an attempt to reconcile the two, but no one was able to bring them together. Although she complained of financial need, she still had some of her inheritance, and she lived independently for at least part of her remaining years. When she died on October 8, 1881, she left John a “mourning gold ring, in token that I die in love and friendship toward him.” If so, it was a “love and friendship” that could not be sustained in a life together.

Neither Sally nor Molly was a Methodist leader, directly influencing the course of the movement’s history. Sally possessed an indirect influence, for her marriage to Charles partly shaped his subsequent role in Methodism. John, on the other hand, did not readjust his life in response to his marriage. This gives evidence of his strong dedication to carrying out God’s will as he understood it. At the same time, it shows a blindness on his part, and he must bear some of the responsibility for the unhappiness and the ultimate breakdown of the marriage. Together, the lives of the Wesley wives allow us a more intimate glimpse of their husbands and help us to understand their leadership in the vital religious tradition which they founded.